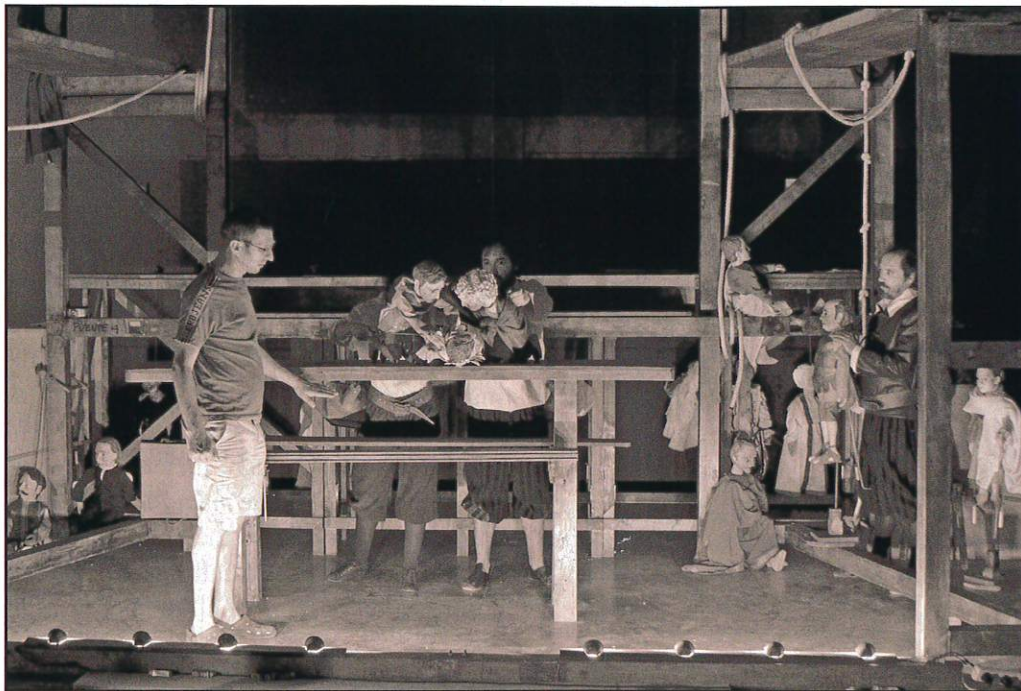


RECOVERING THE INTANGIBLE ART OF BAROQUE PUPPETRY:



AN INTERVIEW WITH JESÚS CABALLERO by Esther Fernández

In 2002, a team of researchers and puppeteers in the town of Cuenca (Spain), led by Jesús Caballero, set the goal for themselves of recovering the *Máquina Real* [Royal Machine], a popular and traditional form of puppetry that was performed all through the 17th century but has been lost to modern society. The terminology *máquina real* refers to those companies that performed mainly *comedias de santos* [plays about the lives of saints] in *corrales de comedia* [17th-century Spanish playhouses], usually during Lent when live actors and actresses were banned from performing on stage. Although the exact origin and meaning of the expression *máquina real* remains unknown, Francisco J. Cornejo has interpreted the noun, “máquina,” as meaning mechanism and the adjective, “real,” as a reference to (1) the royal permission required by the artists in order to be able to perform with their puppets; (2) the “royal” locations where these companies could present their shows privately and by commission; and (3) the design of the stage, which had clear similarities to the Buen Retiro Palace in Madrid (2006: 17-20).

The *máquina real* is a purely Spanish tradition that was born on the Iberian Peninsula in the 17th century and died there in the 18th century when hagiographic plays lost popularity among the public. John E. Varey is one of the few historians who has mentioned this artistic tradition in his book, *Historia de los títeres en España* [History of Puppets in Spain] (1957), but it was not until Caballero set to work reconstructing it from the scarce historical data available that this type of production returned to life.

We could argue that Caballero has recovered an intangible Spanish heritage insofar as he not only reconstructs the most tangible aspects of these productions, but he also re-imagines the handling techniques and performances of the puppets based on historical sources. In collaboration with his team, he has been working for more than seventeen years to give form to a key entertainment feature in the dramatic history

ACTORS REHEARSING LOPE DE VEGA'S *SEEING IS BELIEVING*
PHOTO COURTESY OF JESÚS CABALLERO



Puppet Show] (2017), adapted from one of the most renowned episodes of *Don Quixote* (1605-15).

of Spain and Spanish culture in general. In 2009, Caballero and his company—called La Máquina Real—premiered *El esclavo del demonio* [The Devil’s Slave] (1612), by Mira de Amescua, a play based on the Portuguese legend of Saint Gil of Santarem and, in 2010, *Lo fingido verdadero* [Seeing is Believing] (c. 1608), by Lope de Vega, inspired by the life of Saint Genesius, the patron saint of actors. Since then, this company has toured the most prestigious theater festivals in Spain with new puppet theater productions, most recently having premiered *El retablo de Maese Pedro* [Master Peter’s

Esther Fernández: In the world of puppets, you occupy a unique position as a creator since, in contrast to other companies like the *Bonecos de Santo Alexo* (Évora, Portugal) or the *Títeres de la Tía Norica* (Cádiz, Spain), you have not followed a tradition but have reconstructed one from scratch. What led to your recovering and reconstructing the *máquina real*?

Jesús Caballero: My initiation into the world of puppets took place at the same time as I was finishing my studies in fine arts and was beginning to work on my doctorate, focusing on the restoration of art work using electrophotographic processes. During that period, I discovered Spain’s enormous artistic heritage and the tiny budget that is dedicated to its conservation, cataloguing and dissemination. I was also aware of the complete lack of any history of Spanish *teatro de figuras* [figure/puppet theater], that no physical remains had been conserved, except for a few religious figures used in liturgical dramas and the puppets of Tía Norica. When I met the professor and puppeteer, Francisco J. Cornejo, during a conference in Seville, he spoke to me about some documents found by his research group at the University of Seville in which there was a detailed description of a “*máquina real*,”

an invention mentioned by Varey in his *History of Puppets in Spain*. This conversation aroused my curiosity to know more about productions performed with a *máquina real* and I made the decision to reconstruct a *máquina*.

EF: How was the process of reconstructing this lost puppet tradition?

JC: The lack of documentation about the design of the stage made the job very difficult; there are no models in any museum of what the puppets used in the Baroque *máquinas* looked like, or information on how they were used. Why did some puppets have rods attached to their heads while others stood on pedestals and were operated from below? Was that for demonic and celestial apparitions? What machinery was used to produce these effects? If we are talking about the staging, how can we put together the actors, acrobats, musicians and puppeteers all on stage, with a *retablo* [framework] that measures twenty square meters? Every production is a new experiment. I think the *máquina real* companies were technically very advanced for their time as they combined, perfectly, what today we would call hybrid staging, the simultaneous combination onstage of all the performing and stage arts.

EF: What was most difficult and what was most gratifying about reconstructing the *máquina real*?

JC: What was most difficult was to understand how the *máquina real* performances might have really been according to the contracts found pertaining to the authors of the *comedias* [plays] used by the *máquinas*. We see that they hired women and men from other theatrical acting companies, mostly during Lent. They also hired acrobats to perform entire *comedias* including the interludes, the dances and the bullfight parodies in miniature. What was most gratifying was to see the public’s reaction when they came to our shows, performed in the iconic *corral de comedias* of Almagro. I felt as if I’d traveled four hundred years back in time.

EF: Why do you think we lost so completely both the intangible part as well as the tangible part of the *máquina real* in comparison with other puppet traditions?

JC: Starting with the tangible part, the *máquina real* companies were professional and their costs were very high. The puppeteers were hired for the entire year for a “job” or “production” by the director of the company—and also usually the owner of the *máquina*— who would also provide the puppets and costumes for the puppets and also, almost certainly, the machinery for the special effects and fly system, all of which were very common in hagiographic plays. This means that if in any given year a *máquina real* did

not obtain royal authorization to perform, or if the number of performances was not sufficient to cover the operating costs of the company, they would find themselves obliged to sell everything or else the *máquina* could be confiscated to cover their debts. To this situation has to be added the appearance of the new *teatros a la italiana* [Italian style theaters], such as the Coliseo del Buen Retiro in Madrid, which displaced the *comedia* theaters, and, finally, the arrival of new advances that adapted science to popular entertainment, such as the zoetropes, the magic lanterns, or the *mundi novis*... which found in the markets and fairgrounds a way to convey new discoveries in optics and physics to the citizenry. The intangible part—that of an art of oral transmission, such as the theater—is more fragile and ephemeral, in the moment that a company’s activity comes to an end. All that has been learned is lost. In Spain, there have never been centers specializing in documenting, conserving and transmitting puppet theater, which was developed over centuries of experimentation but hardly left a trace in our culture. Every company carried its knowledge away to another neighborhood. For this reason, it is imperative that schools for puppet theater be created for this task. When what belongs to us disappears, we copy from other countries, losing our cultural identity and heritage.

EF: In a city like Cuenca, considered one of Spain’s world heritage cities, what official aid have you had for recovering this cultural heritage that has been completely lost?

JC: I think that culture in Spain, and specifically in the town of Cuenca, is not considered an investment and, for this reason, there is no funding for it. On various occasions I have proposed a project for the creation of a center for research on puppet theater in Spain, with a special focus on Baroque theater, but there has been no response. The aid we have received has been limited to the production of shows, on a competitive basis.

EF: What was the initial reaction of the public, both in terms of the local audience of Cuenca and other national and international audiences, when they saw the *máquina real* for the first time?

JC: When they see the *retablo*, they all say: It’s enormous! When they see the puppets: How pretty, how heavy they must be! When they see the performance, they are moved. They don’t think a puppet can transmit the same feelings as an actor, and even in some cases to go beyond them. They also ask if they can come to Cuenca to see our other shows or to train with us, but... in Cuenca we don’t have a center for training new actors/ puppeteers or a theater where we can perform on a regular basis.

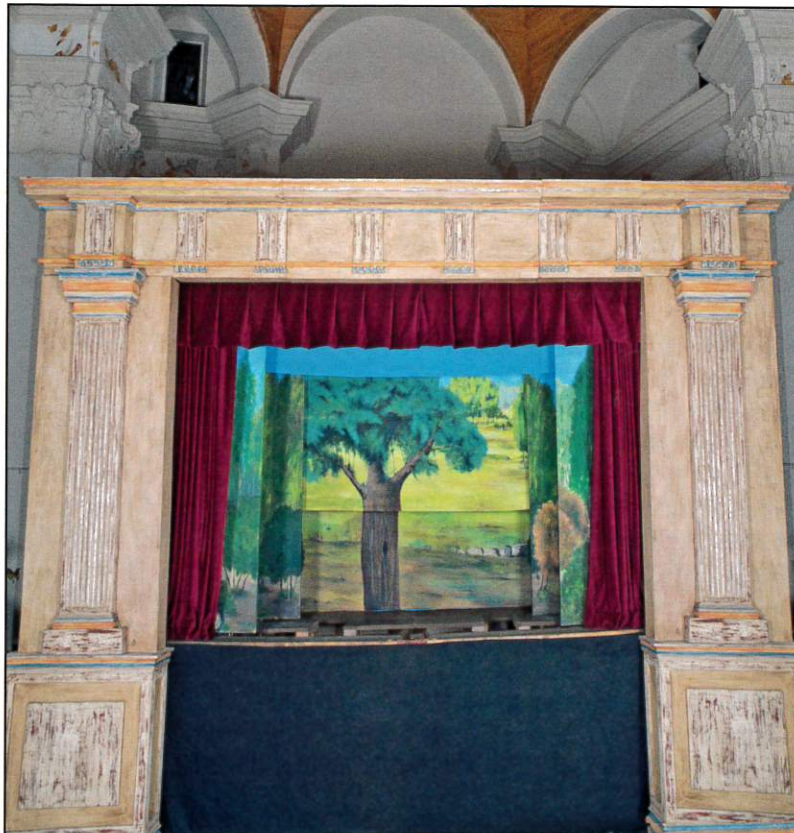
EF: What can be done today, in theory, so that this cultural heritage that you have recovered with so much work will continue and not be lost? Who should contribute today to maintain the *máquina real* active and alive and to pass it on to future generations?

JC: There has to be a center for documentation, research and training, with a permanent and long-term line of work that brings together actors, playwrights, historians, stage designers, musicians, dancers and acrobats to guarantee the recovery and consolidation of the *máquina real*.

The support should come from the National Institute for Performing Arts and Music [Instituto Nacional de las Artes Escénicas y la Música] (INAEM) and regional and local governments, as well as private sponsors and new artists who want to participate in establishing the project.

EF: In other words, you believe the *máquina real* could fall back into oblivion?

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FRONT VIEW OF THE MÁQUINA REAL’S STAGE STRUCTURE [RETABLO] MOUNTED IN THE CHURCH OF SANTA CRUZ (CUENCA) PHOTO COURTESY OF JESÚS CABALLERO

The varied stories of each island allow the viewer to understand different colonial/neo-colonial histories. In each instance, the video addresses the same sets of questions. The responses take us from beginnings (now forgotten traveling puppeteers or international companies on world tours), through puppetry in children's educational theatre or TV in the late 20th c, to the present. We get short profiles of companies and artists, clips of major productions, and festivals. Each segment ends with puppeteers expressing their dreams for the future.

The core is interviews with the main figures of each puppetry tradition. Presenters are a lively group. One sometimes hears notes of nostalgia (for the energy of youth and support that government or allowed). Changes had diminished the activity in most places. But we also get the visions of emerging groups. Younger puppeteers, designers, directors, dramaturgs acknowledge the legacy of their elders/teachers (who are sometimes their own parents). We get the enthusiasm of this next generation, but it seems their spaces to perform and fiscal resources are often constrained. Puppetry for most is a part-time job. But the use of puppetry for artistic, educational, and political expression is continuing.

These films grow, in part, from Morán's Ph.D. dissertation, *The Development of Teatro Escolar* (NYU, 2005), on the educational puppetry legacy of Leopoldo Santiago Lavandero. The Puerto Rican segment even has footage of Morán interviewing this now dead master teacher. Perhaps this footage was a part of his earlier research. Santiago Lavandero was a visionary who made puppetry a tool. He inspired a generation to use puppetry as their art. The Puerto Rican documentary shows Morán and his Teatro SEA designer José López, both of whom watched Lavandero's shows in their schooldays. They now further the art themselves.

The films note the impact of UNIMA and documents the local heritage of the arts. Would for every country in UNIMA we had a similar puppetry documentary. Important parts of puppet history with links that crisscross the hemisphere and span the globe are here. Each episode allows us time with articulate practitioners and theorists who share their wisdom, disappointments, and dreams for puppetry arts.

—review by Kathy Foley

Kathy Foley is a professor at University of California Santa Cruz and current president of UNIMA-USA.

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JC: If we are unable to create a generation of artists to continue what we have started, then that is how it will be.

EF: I don't want to end on a pessimistic note and, of course, since your project has come into the spotlight, both researchers and puppeteers have tried to give visibility to your work and continue exploring this tradition. What does Jesús Caballero have in store for us in the future? How do you plan to continue sharing this cultural heritage?

JC: At this time, I'm working on the text of *La selva sin amor* [The Lovelorn Forest], by Lope de Vega (performed in Madrid in 1627), and the construction of an operatic stage for puppets as well as creating a whole new set of puppets, with the goal of premiering this opera in 2020. I'm also looking for European partners to set in motion a creative cultural project on the presence of the *máquina real* in other countries, such as Italy, Belgium and Portugal.

ESTHER FERNÁNDEZ is Assistant Professor at Rice University. Her research principally attended to eroticism and the Spanish *comedia*; visual and material culture; and performance analysis of classical theater's most contemporary adaptations. She is currently working on a monograph on animated props in ceremonial and theatrical contexts, where material representations of religious and "non-religious" worlds took place in pre-modern Iberia and their contemporary legacies.

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